Introduction

Friendship and Sympathy

FROM THE COMFORT OF HER STUDY at One West Main in Richmond, Virginia, Ellen Glasgow composed the first of many letters regarding the up-and-coming author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. The year was 1933. The letter, which does not mince words, explained how Glasgow found herself struggling to assist her friend Irita Van Doren, editor of the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, with a list of great forthcoming works in American literature. Lumping *South Moon Under* together with Bromfield's *The Farm* and Carroll's *As the Earth Turns*, Glasgow lamented that she had already passed the stage of writing about peasants and could no longer become excited by books that she felt were being written to capitalize on the popularity of that theme (*PC* 139). At the time, Rawlings and Glasgow could not have been farther divided in terms of their profession or personalities. Glasgow was nearing the end of a prolific career, having published all but the last two of her 19 novels, not to mention her various reviews and editorials, short fiction, and poetry.[1] Rawlings, on the other hand, was just beginning to feel successful as a writer, with *South Moon Under* as her first published novel. The two authors seem to have been cut from different cloth. Glasgow, a fashion-forward urban dweller of the New South, lived in the large downtown Richmond home she had inherited from her father, though she spent some time in a New York apartment, vacationed in Maine, and traveled throughout Europe, and once to Egypt. She experienced financial difficulties during the Depression, but was never destitute. She certainly never experienced the harder living to which Rawlings subjected herself by moving to a remote area of central Florida and attempting to manage her own small orange grove, constructing a Cracker-style home that eventually supported indoor plumbing. A cursory glance at these women's experiences would not predict that their paths would ever cross, much less that they would become kindred spirits.

All the same, Rawlings explains perfectly what drew her to Glasgow after she had already made an impression on the older writer through her 1938 publication of *The Yearling*. In a letter to Glasgow following Glasgow's praise of *The Yearling* and invitation to visit her in Richmond, Rawlings wrote,

> Superficially, our aims and our material would seem so divergent that one could not conceive of common ground. Yet after reading your Prefaces and your Inscription for the delightful cameo that comes to me with your signature and that of Mr. Cabell, it seems to me possible that our object has been more or less identical: to present human beings, as you know one type and I another, struggling against whatever is inimical within themselves or in their background. The enemy may be a complicated social fabric, or the "ironic perversity" within, or the more explicit natural forces. I happen to be more concerned with man in relation to a natural background, than with man in relation to man against a sophisticated background. And there is much of cowardice in my choice of subject matter.[2]

Rawlings was referencing, in particular, Glasgow's repeated description in her Prefaces of the time between novels when she would wait for the springs of her subconscious, what Rawlings refers to as "wells," to fill back up with the creative energy required for a new story to emerge. While both women struggled to keep away from their writing for any substantial period of time, they each toiled over manuscripts with no small measure of frustration, revising and rewriting, and scrapping large sections until their vision was as close to perfect as they felt they could make it.

The catalyst for the convergence of these two writers' lives was the publication of *The Yearling*. Glasgow, who had already stolidly fought to inhabit the more erudite circles of American fiction, made her first overtures of friendship to the younger writer after reading this remarkable book. Unintentionally, Rawlings had written a novel that was most certain to tug on the heartstrings of the older Glasgow by centering her narrative of the disillusionment of Jody Baxter on the boy's relationship with his pet deer, Flag. It is no great secret that Glasgow's deep passion for animals led her not only to establish the Richmond SPCA, but also to bequeath rights to her publications and a large portion of her estate to that establishment when she died. Moreover, Glasgow believed that *The Yearling* showed true genius in its compelling story of the sacrifice in the choice that Jody must make between his own survival and that of Flag, a pet as dear to him as a family member. Glasgow's literature consistently describes the disillusionment of characters coming to terms with impossible situations, but her novels focus on the challenges of characters' relationships with one another and their communities, not on survival. The critics agreed with Glasgow's praise, honoring *The Yearling* with a Pulitzer in 1939, two years before Glasgow was able to earn the same prize with *In This Our Life*, the last of her nineteen books, save for her posthumous autobiography, *The Woman Within*, and the posthumously published sequel to *In This Our Life*, titled *Beyond Defeat*.

Glasgow personally congratulated Rawlings on her success with *The Yearling*, and encouraged her to visit whenever she found herself traveling near or through Richmond. Prior to the receipt of this letter, Rawlings had only once mentioned Glasgow in her correspondences, telling Max Perkins that Glasgow was the one writer who, she had heard, did not struggle with writing the way most writers did—a sentiment she expressed before reading Glasgow's Prefaces. She followed this supposition with, "but I was never one of her admirers and have not read her for a long time" (*MM* 235). In spite of this lackluster review, Rawlings was clearly flattered by the attentions of the renowned author, and visited her in 1941, two years after receiving Glasgow's invitation. Her appreciation for Glasgow's writing may be seen in various pontifications, both publicly in her addresses to organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English, and privately in her personal correspondences with family members.[3] The most notable of these were letters Rawlings wrote to her husband, Norton Baskin, while she was working on her biography of Glasgow.

While no one can tell for certain what occurred during that first visit, it clearly had a significant impact on Rawlings, who wrote to Glasgow shortly after the visit to describe a vivid dream in which she found herself taking care of Glasgow's physical needs while Glasgow imparted her advice and wisdom to the younger writer. In the dream, Rawlings helped Glasgow by convincing her to stop cutting ice into geometric patterns in front of a mansion, taking her inside to warm her hands, and offering her a drink, as Glasgow recommended a valence to go with the drapes in the room. Glasgow's response to the dream described in Rawlings's letter was equally personal in nature, as she claimed that Rawlings held a chosen place in her life, described her feelings of emptiness after finishing *In This Our Life*, and then emphatically encouraged Rawlings to complete *Cross Creek*, a book that Glasgow later reviewed favorably. The relationship between the two women continued through a correspondence that reveals their shared values for conservationism and animal rights, similar struggles to complete manuscripts, and bouts with health-related issues. They continued writing to one another until Glasgow's death in 1945. In fact, Glasgow's last letter to Rawlings was sent days before she passed away. In that final letter, she thanked Rawlings for a delivery of mangoes, encouraged her to complete *The Sojourner*, and lamented that she was not well enough to visit Rawlings in St. Augustine, Florida.

The respect and admiration Glasgow and Rawlings had for one another are revealed time and again in their correspondence with both one another and their respective friends and acquaintances. These poignant letters inspired Rosemary M. Magee's *Friendship and Sympathy: Communities of Southern Women Writers*, an anthology of essays, book reviews, and accolades composed by women writers in the South, and, along with other correspondence shared between Glasgow and the women in her life, *Perfect Companionship: Ellen Glasgow's Selected Correspondence with Women* by Pamela Matthews. The very title of Magee's collection is taken from one of Glasgow's letters to Rawlings, in which she thanks her for a letter received that left her with "a thrilling sense of friendship and sympathy." In explaining why such communities have historical significance for women, Magee writes that women often had little to no access to the types of university, social, or private clubs that educated men frequented, and relied heavily upon makeshift communities of fellow writers with whom they could correspond and commiserate about their careers. Even though Glasgow earned a great deal of respect from literary peers during her lifetime, she was excluded from a university education because of her gender, and she would not have been permitted in many of the all-male intellectual clubs and gatherings of Richmond or New York.

Rawlings had more direct exposure to the public literary world through her education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and her various positions as a journalist, but, by and large, her paid articles focused on topics such as homemaking or important women in the community. Magee pointed out that even relationships like the one Glasgow had with Allen Tate had to bow to women's exclusion from literary societies. The Vanderbilt Fugitives, for example, "referred to one another as 'Brother'" and permitted no women attendees when they met as a group in Greenwich Village (Magee xix). Glasgow may have shared a lifelong friendship with James Branch Cabell, but she was often annoyed by his prejudicial views of women in general and of her as a woman writer. In the lengthy dream described by Rawlings early in her friendship with Glasgow, she depicts Cabell as interrupting the two of them, and then adds in parentheses, "(As of course he would!)" (*PC* 210).

Glasgow and Rawlings also shared personal experiences as women, such as their decisions not to have children and their difficulties with romantic relationships. These experiences beg a sympathetic listener, yet their struggles were unique to their lives as professional novelists who happened to be women, making it difficult to find peers who could understand what they were going through. Glasgow's desire for such connections came across in her first letter to Rawlings and in a series of other letters to women writers with whom she shared a friendship during the latter part of her life.

Glasgow's extension of friendship to Rawlings illustrates the compassion and admiration that women writers of their era often felt for one another, in a sense developing relationships for which the tag of "friendship" is plainly inadequate. In her introduction to the collection of Glasgow's correspondence with women, *Perfect Companionship*, Pamela Matthews describes what she calls "Glasgow's lifelong preference for and dependence on the company of women" (xiii). Glasgow did attempt and establish a great deal of correspondence with other women writers, especially later in her career when she sought solace from companions with whom she could share her history. Matthews locates these desires for friendship "in a time of transition between the nineteenth century's acceptance (even admiration) of 'romantic friendships' between women and the twentieth century's more complicated awareness that such friendships might be sexual" (*PC* xiii). She points to examples of Glasgow's awareness of this shift, but it is important to note that Glasgow, as her writing suggests, maintained a reverence for certain Victorian ideals of the old South. Her novels often depict a struggle between the desire to preserve a tradition and the necessary disruption to tradition that must occur for social justice and personal liberties to thrive. Sadly, Matthews had to contend with the destruction of much of Glasgow's correspondence by friends and relatives because of those same Victorian ideals. Her survivors felt an imperative to preserve Glasgow's modesty and decorum before and after her death by not allowing her more emotional letters to be read by strangers.

In the span of a generation, this concept of preserving modesty by destroying letters had all but disappeared. No one considered destroying any of Rawlings's correspondence, even though she occasionally asked for confidences to be kept. Rawlings's letters are highly informal, at times even lewd. In her letters to Perkins, she went so far as to admit directly to breaking various laws, from moonshining to hunting in restricted areas. One letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald detailed her amusement when a telegraph operator asked her whether "menopause" were all one word (Bigelow and Monti 137). Not only were her letters more informal than Glasgow's, but they also indicated a stronger emotional connection with the men in her life. Rawlings expressed a vulnerability and intimacy in her correspondence with both Norton Baskin, her second husband, and Max Perkins, her editor. These connections meant that for Rawlings, Glasgow signified something more than simply a woman with whom she could share an emotional and professional connection; Rawlings already had those kinds of connections. Instead, Glasgow was a kind of literary matriarch to an up-and-coming writer whose reputation was just beginning to exceed her own expectations. Glasgow had broken through many barriers to excel as a writer, from her gender to her lack of formal education to her Southern heritage. Because of Glasgow and other female literary pioneers, writers like Rawlings were able to succeed based on the